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Thomas W. Russell

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“Ye Are Free ...”

by Thomas W. Russell*

ABSTRACT

“Ye are free, ye are permitted to act for yourselves.”
Heleman 14:30

The thesis of this paper is that free agency is not only central to our faith and salvation, but is also critical to effective therapeutic care.

Our Father in Heaven has given us the ability to make choices. Some of these choices are healthy and help us grow while others are destructive, stop us from living full lives, and can lead to insanity.

Effective therapy enables us to identify the choices we have made and then decide if we want to make new choices.

The first section of this paper presents an example of a person choosing to step back from a schizophrenic break. He does so by learning that he can ask questions and receive information that will provide him with new alternatives.

The second section describes the structure and importance of free agency as taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This central theme is then explored through a discussion of what therapists have learned in effective therapy.

In the third section, Tina struggles with childhood decisions. Those decisions are destructive and could mean her life. The complexity of the therapeutic process is especially examined.

The fourth section draws on the teachings of Christ and their interpretation of those teachings by Elder Boyd K. Packer. From them we learn how to be effective therapists.

The fifth and final section shows the dramatic use of free agency when terminally ill cancer patients use their agency to decide to live — and they do.

(Please note: So that the people described here will not be burdened with history, but rather live their new decisions, their names have been changed.)

Section One

“How long halt ye between two opinions?”
1 Kings 18:21

The room was cluttered and musty from Mel's long hours of secluded living in the apartment. The shades were drawn and food containers were left lying about. Mel clutched his electric guitar as a child might hold on to his only remaining friend. This last year had been dif-

ficult. His schizophrenic break while in the service, his placement in a closed psychiatric unit, and the terror of that time was still vivid in his mind. He spoke fearfully of the patient who roared all night and beat his head against the wall. Mel did not want to go back. He was more frightened of that memory than of the voices he was hearing and the unreality he was again rapidly slipping into. My last weeks of work with him had not been successful. He had not followed through on weekly meetings with one of the therapists at the mental health center, nor would he attend the partial care unit. Constant worry and excessive planning had prevented him from finding a job, thus leaving him at home with little to do.

He was the worst I had ever seen him. Frightened, face flushed, his speech was random and at times incoherent as he spoke to us. “Why are you so frightened, Mel? What are you doing?”

With wringing hands and long silences, punctuated by rapid explanations, he told me that he had lost all hope. He could not get a job or be loved. He did not live the laws of our Heavenly Father. He was cast out forever. Satan continually chased him, and often caught him. How did Mel know these things, I asked? Accusing, he said “How would you know, you do not sit in this apartment long hours as I do!” Staring off into space, he again slipped into the terror of total condemnation.

“You don't know why,” he said, “but I do. Jesus doesn't like what I do. I am immoral and lost.”

I was drawn into his world momentarily — assuring him that with a job, less time on his hands ... He did not listen. I spoke of previous discussions, reviewing again that though he feels his thoughts are evil, the fact that his actions are moral and that he lives the Word of Wisdom means there are positive and good elements in his life. Mel acknowledged with a shake of his head, wanting to believe what I had told him.

My companion Bob, having worked well with me before, sits back easily and appears to offer a silent prayer. I no longer lean forward, the muscles in my back relax, and the prayer is with me. The terror will stay with Mel until he learns and decides. The question I ask is:

“Tonight we started with a prayer to Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ. Do you want to talk to him?”

With a quick smile, Mel says yes, not sure how we will do this thing but wanting it. Setting a chair before his chair, I tell him that we will use a Gestalt exercise in order that he might speak. I remind him that he is in control and may stop at any time. But he is eager now

and wants to begin. Following my instructions, he envisions Christ — his Elder Brother — in the opposite chair. Mel describes how Christ looks so that we can see Him. Mel then tells Christ what he has been thinking. “You don’t want me. I have sinned. I am abominable in your sight.” The words destroy all thoughts of joy. I then instruct him to sit in Christ’s chair and be Christ.

“It’s hard. This is silly.”

“Possibly. But try it. Tell Mel what you think of him, Jesus.”

His eyes close as he tries to be Christ, to be his Elder Brother. At first, silence — he speaks wordlessly. No movement, we wait. And then his eyes are opened with the simple words, “It’s okay, I love you.”

Silence again, and the wonder at what we have heard. Mel sits wordless once more, straining to hear those words again and again. Tears and time. I encourage Mel to say why Christ loves him. And he does so. Mel returns to his own seat again and again to ask those questions that haunted him. He gets his answers — yes, he is loved; yes, he has not always lived as his Elder Brother would want him to, but He still watches over him; yes, yes, yes.

The hour is gone and Mel knows by his discussion that he is not condemned and that when Satan chases him, he is not alone.

With plans made that result in his getting a job a few days later, we close with a prayer of thanks. Our discussions continue over the year and a half we are friends. They end as I move away and he is speaking of buying his first home.

Section Two

“Isn’t it time then that you decide that you’re making a choice? Not just a choice, but you’re making *the* choice. Once you’ve decided that, with no fingers crossed, no counterfeiting, no reservations, no hesitancy, the rest will fall into place.”¹

Elder Boyd K. Packer

Mel made a new decision, a new choice. He learned that he was not damned, but, rather, loved. And he chose to live on the basis of that information. Many more choices must yet be made, but that night he chose to step back from the edge of terror and insanity.

I slowed Mel’s progress down in arriving at that choice when I tried to save him from the terror, or more accurately, when I tried to deny it. I helped him make the choice when I honored his free agency. In 2 Nephi 10:23 Jacob speaks:

Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for

yourselves — to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life.

How often do we get in our own way or in each other’s way when we are trying to make a difficult decision? How often do we want to rescue ourselves and those we help from the terror? Yet we are taught by our Heavenly Father that man “should be an agent unto himself.” (D&C 29:35) To be an agent is to act, to exert power. As a therapist and a friend I must make my own decisions and honor the decision making authority and responsibilities of all other men. President Brigham Young said:

The Lord Almighty has organized men for the express purpose of becoming an independent being like unto Himself, and has given him his individual agency. Man is made in the likeness of his Creator, the great archetype of the human species, who bestowed upon him the principles of eternity, planting immortality within him, and leaving him in liberty to act in the way that seemeth good to him — to choose or refuse for himself...²

As I grow in the Church, the seed ideas of predestination from youth wither. I am taught that I am free, that I can choose. The old games of “there’s nothing I can do,” or “if my parents had only,” or “if only I had” fall away. I am given what I require. I have only to use it.

Wanting to help is not enough, of course. All building takes skill and the skills of therapy can give to the client the permission to act as Mel did. From the time of birth we learn about ourselves from the way others transact with us. From the words, looks, actions, and inaction of those around us, we make decisions about ourselves. Are my parents interested when I am active or do they ignore me? Am I just as important as everyone else in my family or are there others more important than I? As tiny children we work long hours learning about ourselves and how to get along in our family. From a child’s perspective, we make the best choices for ourselves. The baby that is picked up and carried about learns that she is included, a part of the family. The child that is left on its own continually decides that that is the way life should be — do not be close, do not include others. We are all a mixture of these positive and negative learnings or messages. Some of us received many more negative messages and learned that we must be closed, not so sure of ourselves or others. Muriel James, in *Techniques in Transactional Analysis*, says it best this way:

To become autonomous, most people need to rethink the decisions they made in early childhood about themselves and about other people. Many of these decisions were a result of parental programming.

Parental programming is not the “fault” of parents — since they are only passing on the programming they got

from their parents — any more than the physical appearance of their offspring is their “fault” since they are only passing on the genes they got from their ancestors.

Parental programming is a fact of life and is both negative and positive.³

As professionals, therapists spend their time with people who have gotten too much negative information about themselves and the world. Often these people *wait* for something to happen. The information is so debilitating that they do not know that they are worthy and able to make a change. They wait, possibly for a type

... of Santa Claus who will bring the individual a magic to crown his life. People wait varying lengths of time before fall into despair which, other things being equal, determines when they seek treatment — some at 20, some at 40, and some at 60. Failing ‘Santa Claus’, there are four alternatives from which the individual can choose. The most decisive is suicide in one form or another,⁽²⁾ sequestration from society — state hospital, prison, rooming house, (3) get rid of the people held to be responsible for the failure — divorce, homicide, children to boarding school, (4) ... redecision ...⁴

When I worked with Mel, we did not get to his early decisions as described above. We were at the critical stage of just keeping him from losing control of his life. Those more basic choices, or as Elder Packer says, “*the choice*,” will come as Mel is ready to handle them.

Tina did make *the choice* and it was a stirring time, not only for her but for me and the members of the therapy group.

Section Three

“And death shall be chosen rather than life...”
Jeremiah 8:3

In *The Magic Years*, Selma Fraiberg ably describes the wonder and yet the lack of information with which little children must start to understand our world. A face appears above the baby, smiles and coos to it, and moves away. Daddy is here and then gone — disappeared? The toilet flushes and all is gone — curious. The warm carrots squish delightfully between my fingers and Mom is mad? We are limited in our experience and decision making ability at this early time. In a happy, supportive home we are allowed to grow. In an unhappy home the ‘magic’ becomes destructive and is best stated this way:

Many of these childhood decisions are positive and have an overall beneficial effect on our lives. Many of them, on the other hand, do not. In some cases, these decisions were made as the result of traumatic or painful experiences. If children see their parents engaged in terri-

ble fights ... consequently they set rules for themselves that they must always be good, pleasing, and cheerful, no matter what their real feeling are.⁵

Both Tina and I were members of the same group and Bill Hawley was the therapist. Bill functioned as an artist among us, helping us remember those early decisions made during the magic time of our youth and asking us if we still wanted to keep them.

Tina was there but resisted everything. Severe hair cut, a lovely woman clothed in baggy jeans, flannel shirt, and boots — and sadness. Tina had told us she wanted to die. Scared as she was by that thought, she was moving closer each day to that choice. She lived a grim life. Parents crazy and dangerous, and now a boyfriend who cheated on her with other women in their bed while she was at work. She had a job that stifled her both intellectually and physically. Tina was going to kill herself and be done with this existence. That would stop it once and for all. As she talked, her anguish and her solution of death filled the room and depressed us into our chairs. Was there no way out? Our solutions — moving out of town or getting her to agree not to commit suicide — made little impact.

Bill said to her, in a quiet voice that she could respond to, “You’re right, you should be committing suicide.”

“What do you mean by that?” Tina asked, angrily pulling her flannel shirt tight across her and looking away.

Bill went on. “You were the oldest child. Even at age six you had to get the smaller children out into the back yard when your mother would fly into dangerous rages. You, as a six-year old, had to confront her so that you could protect your sister. And your mother’s reaction? ‘You know too much.’ You were the problem because you told mother what she was doing wrong. Your father accepted your mother’s craziness and disapproved of a daughter who would suggest such things.”

That is the way life had been taught to Tina and she accepted it. The messages Tina had learned from her parents were, “Life is tragic, I am the trouble-maker, and I can’t change things.”

As Bill spoke these words he shattered her world and Tina was angry, very angry. It was frightening learning that she no longer had to live life as she had been. It would be scarier still, learning how to live her new life.

“You’ve chosen a crazy relationship with a man because that is what you know — living in a crazy situation. You know no other way.”

Tina wouldn’t accept this new picture of herself and remained angry. She did agree not to commit suicide this week and she promised to come back. While others of us worked, she spent the remainder of the session half listening to us and wondering at what she had just encountered. While protecting herself with anger, she knew her life had changed.

It took Tina months to make new decisions about life and herself. Gold pierced earrings, warm yellow blouses, and well-pressed slacks showed us that she was growing and becoming healthy in her life.

Tina now faces the process of forgiving those who had trained her to die or to live in destructive ways. The Simontons say it in this way:

Some people allow resentments from countless sources to mount for years. Many adults carry such feeling from childhood experiences which they remember in great detail. These may be over what they felt was a lack of parental love, over rejection by other children or by a teacher, over specific acts of parental cruelty, and endless other painful experiences.

No matter how justified those feelings may have been when the experience first occurred, continuing to carry them has tremendous physical and emotional cost. *If you are harboring such feelings, the first thing you must acknowledge is that you — not the other person — are the ultimate source of your own stress.*⁶ (my emphasis)

It is not the purpose of this short paper to also describe the complex process of forgiveness. But it is important to use this point as a way of indicating the depth and the difficulty faced as a therapist and a client work together.

“Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men...” (2 Nephi 28:31). Through all this complexity we need a vision to guide us.

Section Four

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”
Proverbs 29:18

Jesus Christ and his teachings must be our guide as therapists. The process of decision making, of choosing, and honoring each person’s free agency is an exciting and complex process.

How often do we analyze beyond what is required? How often are we caught in our own unmade decisions to the extent that we cannot help others with theirs? Do we have all the skills we need in order to help?

Christ teaches us that Satan cannot cast out Satan (Mark 3:23). If we are wrestling with the same problems and not making decisions *ourselves* we will be a hindrance, not a help to those who come to us.

No man can enter into a strong man’s house and spoil his goods, except he will first bind the strong man; and then will

spoil his house.

Mark 3:27

Christ is my Elder Brother. As I read and study his works, my trust grows in Him and I find great joy in His healing the afflicted. He is my teacher and guide. We both have known those who have chosen insanity in order to protect themselves.

And (he) cried with a loud voice, and said, “What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not.”
Mark 5:7

We have worked with those who finally let the torrent of grief flood from them:

And the spirit cried, and rent him sore and came out of him: and he was as one dead.

Mark 9:28

It is Christ and His life that should be our vision and our goal as therapists.

We have guides that live with us on the earth today. In two different talks, Elder Boyd K. Packer spoke on counseling and free agency:

There are those who want to draw out and analyze and take apart and dissect. While a certain amount of catharsis is healthy and essential, over much of it can be degenerating. It is seldom as easy to put something back together as it is to take it apart.⁷

...we seem to dole out counsel and advice without the slightest thought that the member *should solve the problem himself* or turn to his family.⁸ (my emphasis)

When you are discouraged and feel that you cannot solve a problem on your own, you may be right, but at least you are obligated to try. Every personal resource available to you should be committed before you take another step, and you have powerful resources.⁹

Elder Packer goes further to sound the alarm of the possible loss of our emotional and spiritual independence. He emphasizes the critical drain that occurs when chronic individuals seek endless counsel in our ward and branches. “It drains more strength out of humanity than any other disease.”¹⁰ Elder Packer hammers at the notion of “instant gratification” and the thought that “somehow we should always be instantly emotionally comfortable.”¹¹

When that is not so, some become anxious and all too frequently seek relief from counseling, from analysis and even from medication.¹²

Dr. Eric Berne, quoted in *Techniques in Transactional Analysis*, says, "The transactional analyst says, 'get better first and we can analyze later.'"¹³

We are taught in Doctrine and Covenants 9:8:

...then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

"Do it" is the motto of our Prophet, Spencer W. Kimball. To "do it" is to act, to choose, and to act on that choice. We are put on this earth to decide.

Section Five

"Therefore has man been placed upon earth subject to the influence of good and wicked powers, with a knowledge of the conditions surrounding him, and the heaven-born right to choose for himself."¹⁴

James E. Talmage

Nothing shows the power or the importance of free agency and decision-making so dramatically as the findings of the Simontons at their Cancer Counseling and Research Center in Fort Worth, Texas. In their just published book, *Getting Well Again*, they state:

It is our central premise that an illness is not purely a physical problem but rather a problem of the whole person, that it includes not only body but mind and emotions. We believe that emotional and mental states play a significant role both in susceptibility to disease, including cancer, and in recovery for all disease.

We believe that cancer is often an indication of problems elsewhere in an individual's life, problems aggravated or compounded by a series of stresses six to eighteen months prior to the onset of cancer.¹⁵

Dramatic? Yes. But no more dramatic than Christ's telling the man to get up out of his bed and walk or the power of today's priesthood blessing.

The Simontons have worked with 159 clients, all of whom had malignancies *deemed medically incurable*--each had no chance of living. The national average indicated that they would die of cancer within twelve months. Ninety-six died, but lived an average of 20.3 months. And rather than dying drugged and in deep pain, many led full lives until shortly before their death. And the 63 that still live?

As of January 1978, the status of the disease in the patients still is as follows:¹⁶

	No. of Patients	Percent
No evidence of disease	14	22.2
Tumor regressing	12	19.1
Disease stable	17	27.1
New tumor growth	20	31.8

Caution must of course be taken. The sampling of 159 terminal cancer patients is small. Working with these patients takes years. But just as Alma says, "For every man receiveth wages of him who he listeth to obey..." (Alma 3:27), the same decision process is required with these patients as it is in Mel and Tina's lives. The Simontons explained:

Experiences in childhood result in decisions to be a certain person. Most of us remember a time in our childhood when our parents did something we didn't like and we made an internal pledge: "When I grow up I'm never going to be like that."¹⁸

They, with Dr. Lawrence Le Shan in *YOU CAN FIGHT FOR YOUR LIFE: EMOTIONAL FACTORS IN THE CAUSATION OF CANCER*, have found that cancer patients are people who have: (1) a youth marked with isolation, neglect, and despair, (2) a disruption in later life--"as though the 'bruise' left over from childhood had been painfully struck again," and (3) bottled up despair. The Simontons have found that the cancer is either stopped or retarded in growth when the patients,

believe they can solve whatever life problems faced them before the onset of cancer ... or ... they believe they can cope with them more effectively.¹⁹

The possibilities are exciting. Combined with good medical care and chemotherapy, the cancer patient has a way back to renewed life by making new decisions. This is the frontier of clinical care today.

Free agency is the most precious gift we have. With it we can change our lives and live anew. Without it we are lost, caught, and condemned. The great battle of heaven raged on this very issue. Our Elder Brother led us in the fight. We who are on this earth were on Christ's side. We have only to honor who we are.

It is critically important that you understand that you already know right from wrong, that you are innately, inherently, and intuitively good. When you say, "I can't, I can't solve my problems!", I want to thunder out, "Don't you realize who you are? Haven't you learned yet that you are a son or daughter of Almighty God? Do you not know that there are powerful resources inherited from Him that you can call upon to give you steadiness and courage and great power?"²⁰

*Brother Russell is Director of "The Gathering Place" in Provo, Utah which is sponsored by the Utah County Council on Drug Abuse Rehabilitation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Packer, Boyd K., "Self-Reliance," Ensign, August, 1975, p. 88.
2. Young, Brigham, MILLENNIAL STAR, Vol. 20, p. 43.
3. James, Muriel et. al., TECHNIQUES IN TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS, (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1977), p. 4. — interior quote by Dr. Eric Berne —
4. Berne, Eric, PRINCIPLES OF GROUP TREATMENT, (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 213.
5. Simonton, O.C. and S.M. Simonton and J. Creighton, GETTING WELL AGAIN, (New York: St. Martins, 1978), p. 68.
6. Ibid., p. 165.
7. Packer, "Self Reliance," p. 87.
8. Ibid., p. 86.
9. Ibid., p. 88.
10. Ibid., p. 87.
11. Ibid., p. 93.
12. Ibid., p. 93.
13. James, TECHNIQUES, p. 98.
14. Talmage, James E., ARTICLES OF FAITH, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), p. 54.
15. Simonton, GETTING WELL AGAIN, p. 10.
16. Ibid., p. 11.
17. Ibid., p. 68.
18. Ibid., p. 58.
19. Ibid., p. 89.
20. Packer, "Self Reliance," p. 88.

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